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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet lists problems involved in the use of standardized tests. It is argued that standardized tests are not really fair and helpful evaluation tools because they reward the ability to answer superficial questions quickly and do not measure the ability to think or create in any field. They also assume that all test takers have been exposed to a white, middle-class background. The only truly objective part of most standardized tests is the scoring. Standardized tests are not completely reliable. Test scores for children and for sub-sections of tests are much less reliable than are scores for adults and for whole tests. Standardized test scores do not necessarily reflect real differences among people and they often do not adequately eliminate underlying biased cultural assumptions built into the test as a whole. Intelligence tests are a type of achievement test that measures knowledge of standard English and exposure to the cultural experiences of middle-class whites. Given that standardized tests do not really reflect what we know about how students learn, that they often fail to measure student achievement, and that they are of limited utility to the teacher, better ways can and must be found to evaluate student achievement or ability. (SLD)

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH STANDARDIZED TESTS?

National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)

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What's Wrong with Standardized Tests?

1) ***Are standardized tests fair and helpful evaluation tools?***

Not really. Standardized tests are tests on which all students answer the same questions, usually in multiple-choice format, and each question has only one correct answer. They reward the ability to quickly answer superficial questions that do not require real thought. They do not measure the ability to think or create in any field. Their use encourages a narrowed curriculum, outdated methods of instruction, and harmful practices such as retention in grade and tracking. They also assume all test-takers have been exposed to a white, middle-class background. (See "How Standardized Testing Damages Education," a FairTest fact sheet.)

2) ***Are standardized tests objective?***

The only objective part of most standardized tests is the scoring, when it is done by machine. What items to include on the test, the wording and content of the items, the determination of the "correct" answer, choice of test, how the test is administered, and the uses of the results are all decisions made by subjective human beings.

3) ***Are test scores "reliable"?***

A test is completely reliable if you would get exactly the same results the second time you administered it. All existing tests have "measurement error." This means an invidual's score may vary from day to day due to testing conditions or the test-taker's mental or emotional state. As a result, many individual's scores are frequently wrong. Test scores of young children and scores on sub-sections of tests are much less reliable than test scores on adults or whole tests.

4) ***Do test scores reflect real differences among people?***

Not necessarily. To construct a norm-referenced test (a test on which half the test-takers score above average, the other half below), test makers must make small differences among people appear large. Because item content differs from one test to another, even tests that claim to measure the same thing often produce very different results. Because of measurement error, two people with very different scores on one test administration might get the same scores on a second administration. On the SAT, for example, the test-makers admit that two students' scores must differ by at least 144 points (out of 1200) before they are willing to say the students' measured abilities really differ.

5) ***Don't test-makers remove bias from tests?***

Most test-makers review items for obvious biases, such as offensive words. But this is inadequate, since many forms of bias are not superficial. Some test-makers also use statistical bias-reduction techniques. However, these techniques cannot detect underlying bias in the test's form or content. As a result, biased cultural assumptions built into the test as a whole are not exposed or removed by test-makers.

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6) ***Do IQ tests measure intelligence?***

IQ tests assume that intelligence is one thing that can be easily measured and put on a scale, rather than a variety of abilities. They also assume intelligence is fixed and permanent. However, psychologists cannot agree whether there is one thing that can be called intelligence, or whether it is fixed, let alone meaningfully measure "it." Studies have shown that IQ scores can be changed by training, nutrition, or simply by having more friendly people administer the test. In reality, IQ tests are nothing more than a type of achievement test which primarily measures knowledge of standard English and exposure to the cultural experiences of middle class whites.

7) ***Do tests reflect what we know about how students learn?***

No. Standardized tests are based in behaviorist psychological theories from the nineteenth century. While our understanding of the brain and how people learn and think has progressed enormously, tests have remained the same. Behaviorism assumed that knowledge could be broken into separate bits and that people learned by passively absorbing these bits. Today, cognitive and developmental psychologists understand that knowledge is not separable bits and that people (including children) learn by connecting what they already know with what they are trying to learn. If they cannot actively make meaning out of what they are doing, they do not learn or remember. But most standardized tests do not incorporate the modern theories and are still based on recall of isolated facts and narrow skills.

8) ***Do multiple-choice tests measure important student achievement?***

Multiple-choice tests are a very poor yardstick of student performance. They do not measure the ability to write, to use math, to make meaning from text when reading, to understand scientific methods or reasoning, or to grasp social science concepts. Nor do these tests adequately measure thinking skills or assess what people can do on real-world tasks.

9) ***Are test scores helpful to teachers?***

Standardized, multiple choice tests were not originally designed to provide help to teachers. Classroom surveys show teachers do not find scores from standardized tests very helpful, so they rarely use them. The tests do not provide information that can help a teacher understand what to do next in working with a student because they do not indicate how the student learns or thinks. Good evaluation would provide helpful information to teachers.

10) ***Are readiness or screening tests helpful?***

Readiness tests, used to determine if a child is ready for school, are very inaccurate and unsound. They encourage overly academic, developmentally inappropriate primary schooling. Screening tests for disabilities are often not adequately validated; they also promote a view of children as having deficits to be corrected, rather than having individual differences and strengths on which to build.

11) ***Are there better ways to evaluate student achievement or ability?***

Yes. Good teacher observation, documentation of student work, and performance-based assessment, all of which involve the direct evaluation of student effort on real learning tasks, provide useful material for teachers, parents, the community and the government.

For further information see Fallout from the Testing Explosion, *from FairTest for $8.95.*

FairTest has other Fact Sheets on Testing. Send SASE to K-12 Fact Sheets at FairTest.